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THE USE OF עבר AND ITS COMPOUNDS IN THE HEXATEUCH.

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More than two centuries ago a French critic of the Old Testament alleged that, among other things, the peculiar use of עבר in the Pentateuch (Deut. i., 1) showed that Moses could not have been its author. It indicated rather as author some one already settled in Canaan. This statement of Peyrère¹ was taken up by others and has come to have the force of a stock argument on that side of the question.² We are fully justified, therefore, in making a brief inquiry into the actual use of עבר, with its compounds (ב, מ, ל), as found in the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua, usually associated with it by critics.

As its verbal root would suggest, the noun עבר may mean (1) *what is beyond, the other side of* something; or (2) *what is over against, opposite*. In the former case a limit of some sort is not only implied, but made prominent; in the latter, the relative position of two things as being simply opposite to one another is the thing emphasized. Moreover, in the former instance, the limit, be it a river or whatever it may, may be in the mind to such an extent that it will itself serve as the point of view of the writer or speaker rather than the one or the other side of it, and so, in perfect harmony with the etymology of the word, עבר be employed to mark *the transit* itself across the limit, whether in one direction or the other. A third and more derived meaning of the noun עבר is *shore, border*, that is, of a river, like the Latin *ora, ripa*. It is found not infrequently in this sense in the Bible.

We see, accordingly, that עבר is a very flexible word and, by itself, an exceedingly vague one. It is simply an auxiliary in conveying thought, and needs to have something added to it in order to carry a clear sense to the mind. And we shall be struck by nothing more forcibly, I think, in our examination of its use in the Hexateuch, than by the fact that the writer, as if conscious of the peculiar vagueness of the word, takes especial pains to show how to use it.

In Genesis the expression is twice found (בעבר, L., 10, 11) and both times in the same sense. Of the funeral train that Joseph led up from Egypt to Canaan for the burial of his father it is said, that it halted at the "threshing-floor of Atad which is בעבר הירדן." Undoubtedly the writer meant to fix the exact spot beyond a peradventure, and for his contemporaries he did so. But we are less fortunate, as we do not know anything about this "threshing-

¹ *Systema Theologicum ex Praeadamitarum Hypothesi* (1655), p. 185 f.

² Cf. Ladd, *Doctrine of Sacred Scripture* (N. Y. 1883). I. p. 510.

floor of Atad." Still, the context, which speaks of the "Canaanites" as seeing and remarking upon what took place there, makes it tolerably certain that it was on the west side of the Jordan (cf. Num. xxxv., 14, Josh. xxii., 11).¹ In this case there would be nothing against, but much in favor of, the supposition that the writer was on the east side. To assume, as some do, that the writer's point of view is and must be the west side, is not only to assume what there is no justification for in the text, but involves one in very serious difficulties with it, besides being an assumption of the very point in debate. If **בעבר** does not mean *across, on the opposite side*, in this instance, it must have the third of the meanings given above, *on the shore* (of the Jordan), and so could not be used by itself for determining the point of view of the writer.

In Exodus **עבר** is used three times (xxv., 37; xxviii., 26; xxxix., 19) and the plural construct of it once (xxxii., 15), but everywhere exclusively in the sense *what is over against, opposite*, as of the lights on the two arms of the the golden candlestick, the rings on the corresponding borders of the highpriest's breastplate and the laws on the two tables of stone. These passages, therefore, are of no special use to us in our present inquiry. In Leviticus the expression does not occur.

In Numbers it is found only in the form **מֵעֵבֶר** (xxi., 13; xxii., 1; xxxii., 19 (twice), 32; xxxiv., 15; xxxv., 14) the prefix having the force of marking more definitely the boundary concerning which **עֵבֶר** is predicated. In the first instance the Arnon is that boundary; in all the others it is the Jordan. In *every* instance the context makes clear which side of the respective rivers is meant, but in such a way as not to fix with certainty the point of view of the writer. That **מֵעֵבֶר** is *not* used by him in the technical sense the word subsequently acquired in its Greek form ($\tau\delta\ \pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\nu$) and had in the time of our Lord ($\tau\delta\ \pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\nu\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \text{Ἰορδάνου}$), as meaning the district east of the Jordan, is clear, from the fact that he employs it as well of the west as of the east side in the very same verse (xxxii., 19) and *never* uses it of the east side without making it plain from the context, just as in other instances, that he does so. He never assumes, in other words, an acquaintance on the part of his readers with any such supposed settled or technical sense. As it concerns the writer's own point of view, as far as he gives us any hint of it, it is neither the east nor the west side of the Jordan (excepting xxi., 13, where the Arnon is mentioned), but the river itself. And in the use of the very same term (**מֵעֵבֶר**) he finds himself free to turn one way or the other, to say, "across the Jordan eastward," or, "across the Jordan westward," as circumstances may require.

And the same thing is conspicuously true of the Book of Deuteronomy. We find here **עבר** (iv., 49), **בעבר** (i., 1; iii., 8, 20, 25; iv., 41, 46, 47; xi., 30)

¹ Dillmann, *Com.*, *in loco*, declares that הכנעני cannot be used of the people east of the Jordan.

and **מעבר** (xxx., 13), all employed in the same general sense of what is beyond or near a border, and, as in the Book of Numbers, in every case but one that border is the Jordan (xxx., 13). As in Numbers, the expression (**בעבר** here, **מעבר** there) emphasizes the border itself rather than one or the other side of it, and in the same context is used indifferently for the east or the west side (III., 20, 25). And when it is used for the east side, it is accompanied, in each instance, by some description that determines the fact, just as when it means the west side. If the writer were really on the east side of the Jordan, as the contents of the Book of Deuteronomy would naturally lead us to suppose, then it is clear that **בעבר** (like **מעבר**) meant for him no more than the Jordan limit, with its shores stretching away on either side. If he was actually on the west side of it, and was trying to create an impression that he was not, but on the opposite side, he has certainly taken a very clumsy way of doing it. As far as the expression he employs is concerned, he effectually effaces not only every sign that he is there, but that he is on either side. He leaves himself floating in the air over the fording-place of the Jordan.

But it might be asked, if the writer was not in fact already in Canaan, would he *so uniformly* in Numbers and Deuteronomy have used **מעבר** and **בעבר** of the east side? For an answer to this question let us turn to the Book of Joshua. Here the point of view is changed, at least is assumed to be changed. The people have crossed the Jordan, and occupied the promised land. Two and a half tribes have returned, or will eventually return, to the east side of the river to take possession of the land assigned them there. If the expression we are considering had for Israel during this period any such sense as has been claimed for it, it would certainly have it in this book, and be seen to have it. The words **מעבר** and **בעבר**, that is, like the tribes inheriting east of the Jordan, would now come into their rightful possessions also, and be no longer used for mere purposes of mystification.

What is the fact? In the Book of Joshua, too, we find all three forms of the word employed: **עבר** (XIII., 27),¹ **בעבר** (I., 14, 15; II., 10; V., 1; VII., 7; IX., 1, 10; XII., 1, 7; XIII., 8; XXII., 4; XXIV., 8), **מעבר** (XIII., 32; XIV., 3; XVII., 5; XVIII., 7; XX., 8; XXII., 7). It is still understood to have the same kind of vagueness attaching to it as in the other books, and is never left undefined. It is still used likewise of *both sides of the river*, and, what is still more remarkable, it is used here a great deal oftener than in any other book of the *west side*, where people and writer are now assumed to be, and notwithstanding the fact that they are assumed to be there (V., 1; IX., 1; XII., 7; XXII., 7).

To the question, then, Does the comparatively uniform—though not exclusive—use of **בעבר** and **מעבר** in Numbers and Deuteronomy for the region

¹ In xxii., 11, it seems to mean "ford" and xxiv., 2, 3, 14, 15 it does not refer to the Jordan.

east of the Jordan tend to show that the assumed point of view of the history and historian, as themselves on the same side, is false?—there can be but one answer. Most assuredly it does not. We find the same usage, indeed, when history and historian are actually transferred to Canaan, but we find it with considerably less uniformity. In other words, where we might expect, were this theory true, an exclusive appropriation and application of the word in one sense, we find it used in that sense even less commonly than before. Whether Moses, therefore, was the responsible author of the Pentateuch or not, no reason to the contrary can fairly be derived from the use of עבר in it. It is everywhere employed most intelligently and with perfect frankness and consistency.